

VOLUME 17, NO. 7

JULY 1972

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 17, No. 7, July 1972. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions \$9.00 for one year in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. Copyright H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 1972. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 2441 Beach Court, Riviera Beach, Fla. 33404. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

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One should be on guard against that little bit of larceny latent in almost everybody.



Finger Man

"Hannibal Coggins, mass murderer of the 1960's, escaped from the state prison farm early this afternoon. He disappeared shortly after the noon roll call. Coggins is considered to be extremely dangerous."



HHE SAID that I could call him Fred. Now, as I drove through the flat desert country, we listened to the local newscaster announce:

I turned down the volume of the car radio slightly. "They didn't give a description of Coggins."

Fred nodded. "I suppose because

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it might do more harm than good. People would get all excited and turn in dozens of innocent citizens. It's probably enough that the police know what he looks like."

"I remember the case," I said. "Coggins went on a shooting spree and killed eleven people."

"Twelve," Fred said. "One afternoon he got into an argument with his neighbor about a property line and in due course he shot him. Then, feeling that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb, he strolled about the neighborhood shooting people he disliked. He got twelve, including a dentist and a used-car salesman."

"Obviously he wasn't hanged."

"No. The governor at that time apparently had strong feelings about capital punishment. He commuted the sentence."

The radio began playing western country music.

"How far is it to the nearest gas station?" Fred asked.

I glanced at the map on the seat beside me. "About five miles more to Everettville. Where did you say

you ran out of gas? I didn't see your car."

"It happened on one of those little side roads. Had to walk more than two miles before I got to the highway."

When I picked up Fred, he had been standing at the side of the road carrying a two-gallon gasoline can and waving an entreating thumb. Ordinarily I might have passed him by, but he wore a business suit, and in this desert country where the traffic is sparse one hesitates to pass people in distress miles and miles from the nearest habitation.

"What line of work are you in?" I asked.

"Haberdashery," Fred said. Then he smiled faintly. "But that's getting to be an old-fashioned word. I own a men's clothing store back in Santa Fe. Was driving west to visit my daughter when I ran out of gas."

I glanced at Fred. His suit seemed to be of a good quality, but I couldn't admire the tailoring of the jacket. The back of the collar gaped away from the neck.

Fred patted his armrest. "Nice car. Chevy, isn't it?"

I nodded and then corrected myself. "No. A Ford. My last car was a Chevy. I keep getting the two mixed up."

Far ahead of us, a small cluster of

by Jack
Ritchie

houses came into view. They grew bigger as we approached, and finally we passed a sign which read: *Everettville Pop. 278.*

Half a dozen cars were parked in front of what appeared to be the town's only cafe.

I glanced at my watch. "Nearly six. Frankly, I could use a bite to eat."

Fred nodded quickly. "Sounds like a pretty good idea to me."

I pulled into the parking area and Fred and I entered the cafe.

It seemed to be fairly well filled with patrons. The three booths were all occupied and only two stools, side by side, appeared to be open at the counter.

A law officer, apparently a sheriff, sat at the far end of the counter eating his supper. He was a somewhat paunchy, middle-aged man wearing sunglasses. He also came equipped with a wide-brimmed white hat and a service revolver on a belt generously studded with cartridges.

Fred and I took the two vacant stools and studied the typewritten menu cards.

Fred looked up at the wall clock. "Excuse me, I think I'd better phone my daughter and explain why I'll be late. Save my stool." He went to the phone booth at the end of the room.

His back was turned toward me,

but as I watched him I thought I saw him writing something on the margin of the telephone book.

I studied him for another few seconds and then pulled a paper napkin from its holder. Using my ball-point pen, I printed in block letters:

Hannibal Coggins, the escaped killer, is sitting next to me at this counter. He is dangerous and probably armed and will not hesitate to kill.

I folded the napkin into a tight wad and rose. I walked past the telephone booth to the jukebox, ostensibly to study the list of records.

Almost at my elbow, the sheriff transported a forkful of mashed potatoes to his mouth.

I glanced at the phone booth again. Fred seemed to be still busy, but was he somehow watching me?

As unobtrusively as possible, I flipped the wadded napkin over the sheriff's shoulder. It bounced off the catsup bottle and came to rest in his saucer of peas.

I strode firmly back to my stool and picked up the menu.

Fred joined me in less than a minute. "Anything look good enough to eat?"

The sheriff appeared behind us. He tapped the shoulder of a burly individual on my right. "Are you Hannibal Coggins?"

"Not him," I whispered fiercely.

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"On my *other* side." I pointed to Fred.

Fred, in turn, pointed a finger at me. "Careful, Sheriff, he's probably armed."

The sheriff's eyes went over both of us. Then he produced the note I'd written and read it aloud.

Fred's mouth gaped slightly.

The sheriff next read from a scrap of paper which had evidently been torn from a telephone book:

The man on the stool to my right is Hannibal Coggins, who escaped from the state prison farm today. He's a mass killer and extremely dangerous.

I smiled tightly. "Quick thinking, Fred, but *my* note takes precedence."

Fred reached for his back pocket, but stopped when the sheriff's hand went to the butt of his gun.

"My name is Fred Stevens," Fred said stiffly. "I'm from Santa Fe. I've got *full* identification."

"Of course," I said dryly. "And out there in the desert lies the body of a man without a wallet or a suit of clothes." I indicated Fred's collar. "Would a man who claims he owns a haberdashery wear a suit that bulges so badly at the collar? It's little things like that which trip up the criminal."

Fred's voice rose. "I've got square shoulders and it's pretty hard to find a ready-made suit that

fits square shoulders." He turned on me. "And what about *you*? You were driving a Ford, but you thought it was a Chevy until you took another look at the nameplate. Speaking of bodies in the desert, there's probably somebody lying out there who used to own a Ford."

The sheriff studied us and then rubbed his jaw. "I don't have any mug shots of Hannibal Coggins yet. The State Police will probably get around to sending me some in a couple of days."

Fred blinked. "But surely you must have a *description* of Hannibal Coggins?"

"Well, yes. But it's pretty general and could fit either one of you, or half a dozen people in town. Suppose I just put *both* of you behind bars until I find out which one is the real Hannibal Coggins?"

Fred protested. "On what *specific* charge do you think you could arrest *both* of us?"

"Litterbugging," the sheriff said. "You two been throwing wads of paper around and that can play hob with the ecology." He put a hand on the butt of his revolver again. "Now stand up and turn around."

We did as we were told.

He searched us, but found no weapons.

"Fine," he said. "Turn around and march out the door. The jailhouse is right next to Harry's Bar."

It was a short, though dusty, thirty-second walk to the adobe jailhouse. Inside, it was nicely cool. The small building consisted only of an area for the sheriff's desk and filing cabinet and two unoccupied cells.

The sheriff put one of us in each of the cells.

"What do you intend to do now?" Fred demanded. "Wait for the mail?"

"No," the sheriff said. "The simplest thing to do is for me to drive up to Phoenix and have a look at Hannibal Coggins' picture." He picked up the phone, dialed, and got somebody named Jim. He told Jim to come over to the jailhouse.

Jim appeared within ten minutes. He was a thin man in his middle twenties, thoroughly Adam's-appled, and with the usual suntan that ended abruptly at the hatline.

"My deputy," the sheriff explained. He handed Jim a badge and then turned back to us. "I'd like to take your fingerprints along to Phoenix."

Fred and I both protested, but our prints were taken.

After the sheriff left for Phoenix, Jim sat down at the desk and picked up a true detective magazine. He paged through it, found something interesting, and began reading, his lips moving slowly.

Fred went to the bars of his cell.

"How long will it take the sheriff to get to Phoenix?"

"Two hours there and two hours back," Jim said.

Fred watched him read for a while. "So you're the deputy?"

Jim nodded. "Part-time—whenever I'm needed. Otherwise I work at Bud's Garage."

"How much does deputizing pay?"

"Three-fifteen an hour. And when I get in six months' time—that's 960 hours—I become eligible for health insurance."

"How many hours do you have in now?"

"Exactly 623. Took me five years of part-time to accumulate that."

Fred reached for his wallet and pulled out a number of bills. "There's five hundred dollars in this roll." He folded the bills and tossed them out of his cell. "Well, well, Deputy, look what dropped out of your pocket."

Jim frowned and shook his head. "No, siree. We'll have none of that hanky-panky while I'm on duty."

He got a broom and pushed the money back to the cell bars. "It might be more polite to hand it back to you personally, but we're not supposed to even touch the prisoners' money."

I lay down on my bunk. After a while I groaned slightly.

The deputy looked my way.

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"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I have a terrible pain in my side," I said. I groaned again.

The deputy scratched his ear. "If it's appendicitis, there's nothing much I can do except phone the doctor. Only we don't have any here in town. I'd have to get Red Rock."

"I'm positive it isn't appendicitis," I said. "But perhaps you could bring me a glass of water and a couple of aspirin?"

The deputy found some aspirin in the desk drawer and drew a paper cupful of water from the water cooler.

He put the cup and the aspirin on the end of a narrow board and shoved it through the bars toward me.

"I'm not allowed to go in there," he explained. "Especially when I'm alone. You can never tell what might happen."

I swallowed the aspirin, drank the water, and lay down again.

In the next cell, Fred chuckled. "Nice try."

I turned on him indignantly. "I don't know what you're talking about. I get this stitch in my side during moments of stress."

After a while, I dozed off.

The ring of the telephone woke me. The deputy reached for the phone and listened. Finally he hung up and smiled in our direction.

"That was the sheriff calling from Phoenix. Seems as soon as he got there he found out that the real Hannibal Coggins was just picked up in Stafford. I guess we owe you two some sort of an apology."

He rose, got the ring of keys, and released both Fred and me.

I was a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry, Fred, but I could have *sworn* you were Coggins."

Fred nodded. "I felt exactly the same way about you." He sighed. "Well, I guess I'll get my gas can filled."

The deputy consulted his watch. "It's eight-thirty. Bud's Garage stays open until nine."

Fred and I went back to my car, still parked at the cafe, and he picked up his gas can. "Maybe I can get somebody at Bud's Garage to drive me back to my car."

I felt that possibly I owed Fred something. "I'll drive you back. I really don't have anything important to do at this time of the night anyway."

We got gas at Bud's Garage and then headed back in the direction we had come. It was a rather beautiful night, with a full moon and a clear sky.

I drove nearly ten miles before Fred directed me to turn off onto an ungraveled side road. I had to slow down considerably to negotiate the rough surface.

"There's one thing I don't understand, Fred," I said. "If you aren't Hannibal Coggins, why did you try to bribe your way out of jail? Wouldn't it have been simpler—and cheaper—just to wait until the sheriff proved that you weren't Coggins?"

Fred sighed. "I was afraid you'd think of that. And if you work on it a little more, you'll probably come up with the answer." He pressed open the glove compartment of my car and began rummaging around.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said, "but almost anything will do." He found a screwdriver. "If the sheriff had processed my fingerprints in Phoenix, he would have discovered that Hannibal Coggins isn't the only person in the world who's wanted by the police." He regarded me severely. "Ever been stabbed by a screwdriver?"

"No," I said uneasily. "I can't say that I have." I experienced the familiar tension stitch in my side and winced.

"Relax," Fred said. "Killing isn't my trade. That's why I went through the trouble of turning in what I thought was Hannibal Coggins. I thought that way I might be saving some innocent people's lives."

I felt a certain amount of relief.

He hefted the screwdriver again. "Just the same, remember that this weapon puts me in charge of the situation."

Some two hundred yards ahead of us I could make out the shadowy bulk of a car parked slightly to one side of the narrow road.

Fred gave an order. "Stop the car right here."

I put my foot on the brake. The car swerved to the right as we came to an abrupt stop and Fred fell over me.

He quickly untangled himself. "Now, watch that! You could have gotten yourself killed if it were anybody else but me."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but the car swerves when I step on the brakes. I think one of the front tires is soft."

Fred took my car keys out of the ignition and pocketed them. "I'll leave the keys in the road when I pull away. Now just sit right there and don't move until I'm gone."

Obviously, Fred didn't want me to get close enough to his car to copy the license number.

He picked up the road map on the seat next to me and pocketed that too. "I wouldn't want to get lost again." He opened the car door and left with the two-gallon can of gasoline, glancing back occasionally as he made his way to the shadows of his car. After a while his lights went on and the car pulled away.

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I watched the taillights diminish in the distance and then got out of my car and walked down the road.

In the bright moonlight I had no trouble finding my car keys where Fred had said they would be.

I looked once more at the fading taillights and then made my way back to the car.

Poor Fred, I thought, he's heading for Nelson's Butte.

With the two gallons in his tank, he should be able to get there and a little beyond—or a little back—depending on his decision. That was all, however.

On the map there is an asterisk next to Nelson's Butte. Yet so many people, it seems, cannot find the footnotes on a map, and evidently Fred was one of them.

Nelson's Butte is a ghost town and not a soul has lived there in

over seventy years. Fred wouldn't find any gas stations there, and the nearest live town was more than forty miles farther on.

I started my car, carefully negotiated a turn, and drove back to the highway.

If I'd been an honest citizen, I would have driven back to Everettville and told the deputy approximately where he could pick up Fred.

However, I wasn't an honest citizen.

I, too, have my trade and I ply it well. When I had stepped on the brakes at Fred's order, I had turned the steering wheel slightly so that he would fall against me.

Now I patted the side pocket in which I had Fred's wallet. It contained at least five hundred dollars.

Not bad for one night's work.

» » » » » » » » WATCH OUT « « « « « « « «

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